

Questions for ex-Rhodesian combatants – Carl Gibbard

Background info:

1. Why did you decide to emigrate? And why Rhodesia? What were your family links with Southern Rhodesia?

In 1974 I finished a three-year engagement with the British Army and was looking for a job. I had considered following my father into the Police (Gloucestershire Constabulary) but rejected the idea and had applied to the Royal Hong Kong Police.

I met with a visiting member of the BSAP who provided me with a recruiting brochure on his return to Rhodesia.

The decision to emigrate and join the BSAP had no bearing on politics or anything other than the photograph that appeared on the brochure. A dog handler, dressed in camouflage and carrying an FN rifle. The camouflage was similar to that used in the UK as was the rifle; and I like Alsatians!

2. What were your family links with the UK (emigration from the UK; length of time in Rhodesia; schooling/university/profession.

No family links.

3. Where was 'home'?

Gloucestershire, specifically Cheltenham.

4. When were you conscripted/join the security services? Why did you join?

I joined in early 1975. I chose the BSAP for a number of reasons:

- a. I come from a Police family.
- b. I had encountered the mindset of the Army and my desire to question did not sit entirely well with blind obedience.
- c. I did not want to stay in the UK.
- d. I wanted some adventure in life while I was young and single.

As combatants:

5. What/whom did you think you were fighting for?
What values/'standards'? (Western? European? British?)

I believed that I was fighting for the Rhodesian Government and therefore the Rhodesian people (Black and white). On broader reflection I believed that having a stable, civilised government in Rhodesia was in the best interests of the UK and certainly the surrounding areas.

Prior to leaving for Rhodesia I consulted widely with Army colleagues and a circle of friends. Not one voice cast any doubt on the morality of the Rhodesian situation; most criticised the British Government of the day.

6. What/whom did you think you were fighting against?

On the ground a rag tag collection of Rhodesian blacks who had been trained by the Chinese and Russians, armed with a collection of Chinese and East European armaments and commanded by thoroughly indoctrinated individuals.

What formed your outlook?

Mainly personal observation and experience. Early on in my Police career I had assisted SB with the collection of combatants (Alive and dead). Later on I was also responsible for field de-briefs and interrogations.

Media/friends/music?

Not really. I think most whites recognised the Government media for what it was. Most of my circle of friends tended to be in similar roles to myself and so were largely seeing the sort of things I saw. The music I listened to most was Country and Western and modern (In those days!) tapes supplied by my family.

Was there political indoctrination/regular discussions from your commanding officers

No.

Political discussions with your mates?

Not really. More discussion about sport, girls and maudlin stories about lost comrades! Usually after a lot of beer!!!

7. How much understanding did you have of the war? What were your sources of information?

I believe I was fortunate to have a good understanding of the war, certainly on a tactical level.

My frequent trips to the UK were also useful to garner opinion in the UK which in the main was always supportive (But then again Cheltenham is a very Conservative place!)

As a member of Special Branch I was privy to more information than the man in the street. I believe that we also maintained a good grip of intelligence throughout the entire country right up until the 1980 elections (Which I think we accurately predicted the results to!)

How important do you think the international environment (Cold War) was in shaping your attitudes to the war/liberation struggle?

Personally, not a lot. I enjoyed what I was doing, I was good at it and I believed morally it was a good thing. I am not a card carrying Church person but I do follow Christian ethics and I have always had a desire to do the right thing.

8. How far do you think that the war helped to create – and sustain a sense of Rhodesian identity? What other factors do you think were important? How much had you travelled outside Rhodesia?

The Rhodesian identity; indeed a force to be reckoned with. I am sure you are aware of the network of ex-Rhodesians who maintain regular contact around the world. The BSAP Association is as strong worldwide as it ever was.

I would actually liken it to the sort of attitude produced amongst victims of the Blitz. When you stand together in the face of adversity a special bond develops.

Construct of 'The Other':

8. How far did you differentiate between black Rhodesians and the guerrillas?

For most of my service I worked closely with black Police and Soldiers. The relationship between Police was close and much less formal in the rural areas. I discussed the beliefs, customs and aspirations of many black colleagues.

After 1980 I met a number of ZANLA men. Most were just like the guys I worked with only they had chosen the other side (Or in most cases had it chosen for them). Of the ordinary foot soldiers I met, I believe most would have been happy to remain under white rule.

Obviously the higher you go in the organisation then the motivation changes. Of the commanders I was able to meet all espoused political rhetoric; but after a few drinks the capitalist aspirations came to the fore.

What was your relationship/contact with Rhodesian black troops?

At the height of the war I was stationed in Nyamaropa. I had 36 regular black Police and 365 irregular militia (Pfumo re Vanhu). All were heavily armed and most were involved in ambushes or attacks on our base camp. I had complete trust in my staff and a healthy regard for the militia. At any time it would have been easy to dispose of me should they have wished it.

How far did you feel it to be a tribal war? Racial war? Civil War? Ideological war?

By 1980 it was all of these things.

Fundamentally the average white did not have confidence in the blacks ability to rule successfully (Some would say this belief is borne out today!)

From the black perspective race was almost certainly a factor as well. Civil war and ideology are used to justify the chimerenga but at the end of the day I believe it was greed on the part of all of the senior members of both

sides that was the main force behind the war. The black leaders wanted it all and the whites didn't want to give it up.

How far do you think this affected HOW the war was fought?

Mugabe and his cohorts were quite happy to send a constant stream of black fighters into the Rhodesian mincing machine. The Rhodesian forces were content to fall back on established British principle for fighting an irregular war. But at the end of the day it became a set piece of attrition.

What did you think of white immigration/immigrants (post war? Post 1965?) South Africa?

I think almost all of the senior offices in the Police and Armed Forces were former servicemen involved in the Second World War; many of the politicians as well.

Their war service almost certainly coloured their attitudes. They had fought in and survived a massive war; settled in Rhodesia to establish a fantastic lifestyle. Having done all of this who would want to hand it over?

South Africa acted only in South Africa's best interests. I believe that the support of Rhodesia only went so far as to take pressure off of the white leadership in SA.

Finally, with the cynical of motives SA conspired to sacrifice Rhodesia to try and extend its own future and then played a large hand in the initial destabilisation of Zimbabwe. Their motive there was not wanting a strong, black neighbour.

Leaving:

9. When did you leave Rhodesia/Zimbabwe?

1984

When did you come back to the UK?

1984

How did you find Britain? How different did you feel from British citizens?
Why?
What did you think of the 'end of empire'?

Coming back to Britain by 1984 was definitely coming home. The situation in Zimbabwe had already deteriorated to the extent that it was not difficult to see the writing on the wall.

I was fortunate to have a job in the UK that sent me back to Zimbabwe regularly right up until 1990 when I accepted a twelve month contract to return there. I lasted six months and returned to the UK.

The empire ended a long time ago; in my opinion mores the pity. Colonial Britain is often portrayed in a negative way nowadays; however, the many benefits it bestowed on many continents are often forgotten.